

Identifying the subject in a sentence

Identifying the subject of a sentence is useful in making the subject and the verb agree, and in creating a sentence with a solid core. When a sentence has only a few words, locating the subject is seldom a problem. However, in larger sentences the subject may become hidden in the midst of other words. For example, dependent clauses can be attached to the independent clause of the sentence. Because dependent clauses have their own subject and verb, their subject may become confused with the main subject of the sentence. Another reason the subject may be hard to identify is that many words may be inserted between the subject and verb, making the connection between them less obvious. And note that many types of phrases and clauses can function as nouns, and therefore can also function as subjects of sentences. Below are some things to watch for when identifying the subject of a sentence.

1. Subjects in sentences with dependent clauses

The subject of a sentence is never found in a dependent clause. Dependent clauses must always be attached to an independent clause, where the real subject of the sentence is found. The problem is that a dependent clause has its own subject and verb. Therefore, all dependent clauses must be identified and eliminated when locating the subject of the sentence. Here are example sentences showing one or more dependent clauses underlined, and the actual subject of the sentence identified:

- 1a. After the meeting was adjourned, Frank went to dinner. ("Frank" is the subject of the sentence)
- 1b. Carrie helps her mother whenever she is home and has enough time. ("Carrie" is the subject of the sentence)
- 1c. Whenever Mary has a break in her schedule, which I know is not often, you can ask for her help. ("You" is the subject of the sentence)
- 1d. If there is no objection from the neighbors, the fence can be removed, although this could cost us a lot of money. ("Fence" is the subject)

2. Subjects in sentences with many inserted words

Frequently sentences are expanded with non-essential words and modifiers that are "inserted" into the sentence, making it more difficult to locate the subject. Below are example sentences showing inserted words underlined and the subject identified:

- 2a. Sam, the guide who had taken us into the jungle on several former occasions, found us. ("Sam" is the subject of the sentence)
- 2b. Wanting the best possible yields, and impatient to find new ways to avoid having to operate at the mercy of the weather, farmers are developing new techniques. ("Farmers" is the subject)
- 2c. The replies, which were given entirely in Latin and which were always quite brilliant, nevertheless failed to impress the examiners, as the test concerned ancient Greek. ("Replies" is the subject)

3. Subjects in sentences with prepositional phrases

The subject of a sentence is never found inside a prepositional phrase. However, note that in certain rare cases, an entire prepositional phrase can actually function as the subject of a sentence. The sentences below, with prepositional phrases underlined, show examples of this principle:

- 3a. In the middle of the day, Dakota studied the software. ("Dakota" is the subject)
- 3b. One of my friends, up in a tree, is greatly in need of my help. ("One" is the subject)
- 3c. Since they left the base camp, the climbers, under great stress and forced to sleep under rocks, could not help worrying about their next meal. ("Climbers" is the subject)
- 3d. In the middle of the action is the place I want to be. (The entire prepositional phrase "In the middle of the action" is the subject)

4. Subjects in sentences with phrases and clauses that function as subjects

We have seen above that prepositional phrases can function as subjects. Additionally, other types of phrases and clauses may also function as subjects of sentences. The sentences below have these types of phrases and clauses underlined:

- 4a. What they finally did with the buried treasure remains a mystery. (A clause is the subject of the sentence)
- 4b. The salesperson wandering around the lot spotted my grandmother. (A noun phrase is the subject)
- 4c. That you do not trust me bothers me. (A clause is the subject)
- 4d. Swimming across the Mississippi on cold mornings is my favorite activity. (A gerund phrase is the subject)

5. Subjects in sentences with an "understood" subject

In sentences that are commands or requests, the subject "you" is always understood, as in the following sentences:

- 5a. When the asteroid hits the earth, get under a table. (The subject "you" is understood in an imperative sentence; the word "asteroid" is not the subject of the sentence)
- 5b. Please pass the butter, salt, potatoes, and all the other food on the table. (Again, the subject "you" is understood in a request; the food is not the subject)